PROJECT

747

People Talk about their Housing

City of Boston
Raymond L. Flynn, Mayor

Public Facilities Department
Lisa G. Chapnick, Director

INTRODUCTION

THE DEVELOPMENTS

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THEIR HOUSING

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

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Over 75 Boston residents talk about their housing in the following pages. All are recent homeowners, or nearby neighbors. Their words offer important messages — about the qualities of where they live, and about the way housing is being developed today.

The City of Boston, through the Public Facilities Department, has made a commitment to develop affordable housing on City-owned buildable lots. The idea for the report came out of this commitment. The experience of the new homeowners can enhance our capacity to produce **quality** affordable housing.

Five housing developments were selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) Recently built and occupied for at least one year; (2) a goal of affordability by their developers; and (3) a variety in building types, site plans and kinds of ownership.

All residents were approached and asked for interviews. Those that agreed were asked general questions, leaving the direction of conversation open to change. Notes were taken to record people's firsthand comments and recommendations.

Residents' observations are condensed and grouped under seven broad headings of physical design: (1) Organization of the site; (2) Private space outdoors; (3) Common space outdoors; (4) People and cars; (5) Ownership and organization; (6) How buildings look and fit in the neighborhood; and (7) How buildings work. Under each heading the observations are listed by development.

The information has been immediately useful. First hand experience provides val-uable lessons for current projects. Community members and developers benefit from anecdotes about where children play, to uncertainties about who is responsible for project maintenance. Staff members, architects, developers — nearly everyone working on affordable housing development — are struck by the valuable perceptions available through this obvious, yet often untapped resource.

We hope the reader will also benefit from this report.
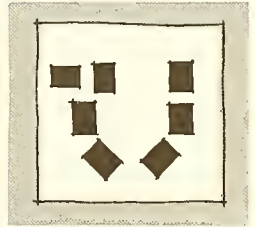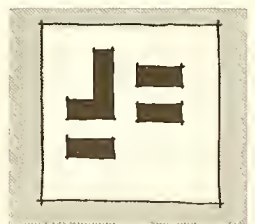

INTRODUCTION

Andrew Square

Champlain Circle

Forest Hills and Glen

Lawn Street

Wenlock and Stock

Residents' observations follow in seven sections — each presents thoughts on a different part of housing design. These comments demonstrate the variety of experience and opinion that was shared in the interviews.

Within each section the observations are grouped by development, and printed in a gray box with a symbol that stands for each development. These symbols were introduced in the previous development descriptions and are shown together above.

THE DEVELOPMENTS
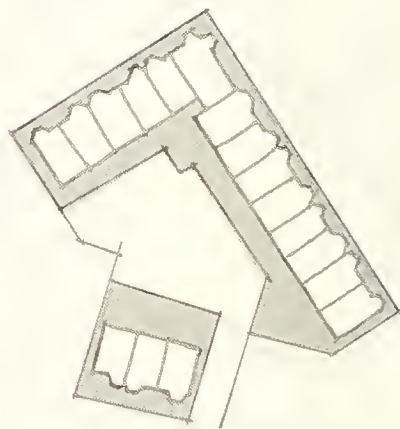
Name:
Andrew Square

Neighborhood:
South Boston

Building Type:
Single Family Rowhouse

Type of Construction:
Wood frame, and Masonary

Number of Units:
16 two-bedroom, 3 one-bedroom

On-Site Parking:
19 spaces (one per unit)

Kind of Ownership:
Condominium

Dates of Construction:
12/85 - 5/86

Date of Occupancy:
July 1986

Andrew Square
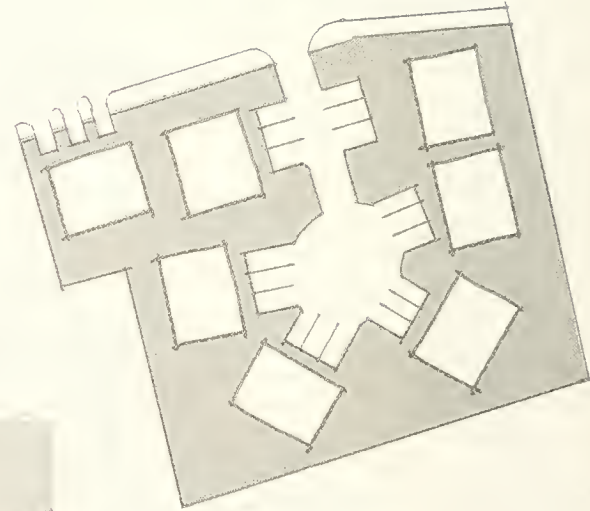
Name:
Champlain Circle

Neighborhood:
Dorchester

Building Type:
Single-family townhouses

Type of Construction:
Wood frame, modular manufacture

Number of Units:
21 two bedroom

On-Site Parking:
One per unit plus guest spaces

Kind of Ownership:
Fee simple

Dates of Construction:
10/84 - 5/85

Date of Occupancy:
Mid 1985
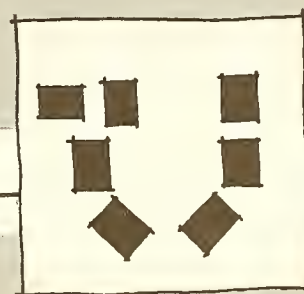
Champlain Circle
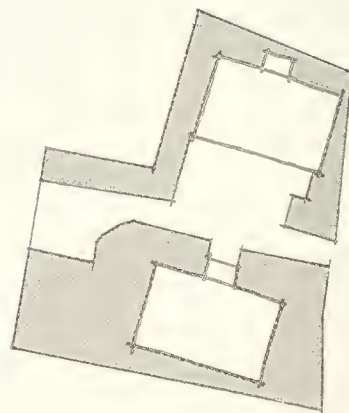
Name:
Forest Hill and Glen

Neighborhood:
Jamaica Plain

Building Type:
Two, four-family buildings

Type of Construction:
Wood frame, modular manufacture

Number of Units:
*2 one-bedroom, 2 two-bedroom,
2 three bedroom, and 2 four-bedroom*

On-Site Parking:
One per unit plus guest spaces

Kind of Ownership:
Condominium

Dates of Construction:
1984 - 85

Date of Occupancy:
1985 - 86
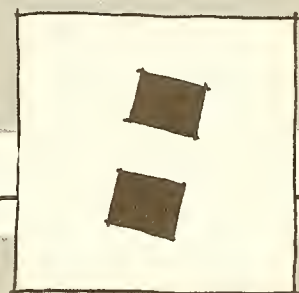
Forest Hills and Glen

Name:
Lawn Street

On-Site Parking:
18 spaces (one per unit)

Neighborhood:
Mission Hill

Kind of Ownership:
Condominium

Building Type:
Single-family townhouses

Dates of Construction:
1984 - 86

Type of Construction:
Wood frame, modular manufacture

Date of Occupancy:
1986 - 87

Number of Units:
6 two-bedroom, and 12 three-bedroom
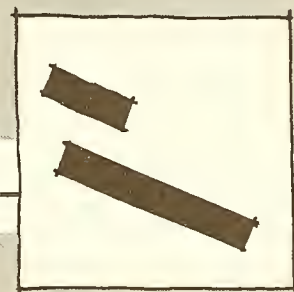
Lawn Street
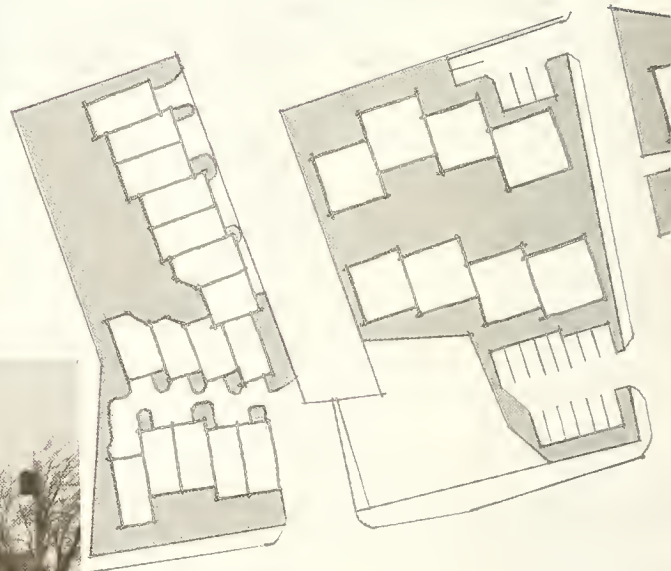
Name:
Wenlock and Stock
  Phase One: Wenlock Street
  Phase Two: Stock Street

Neighborhood:
Cedar Grove

Building Type:
Wenlock: Single-family townhouses
Stock: Single-family rowhouses

Type of Construction:
Wood frame, stick-built
  (both phases)

Number of Units:
Wenlock: 18 two-bedroom
Stock: 16 two-bedroom

On-Site Parking:
Wenlock: 23 spaces (one per unit
  plus guest spaces)
Stock: 16 spaces (one per unit)

Kind of Ownership:
Condominium (both phases)

Dates of Construction:
Wenlock: 10/85 - 12/86
Stock: 6/86 - 9/87

Date of Occupancy:
Wenlock: Early 1987
Stock: 2/3 occupancy as of 5/88

Wenlock and Stock

TALK ABOUT THEIR HOUSING

All the townhouses around this inner courtyard is terrific — the kids play together, we can sit out in our backyards; it's like our own little community."

- "I guess we're lucky with just the three of us over here — it's easier to make decisions."
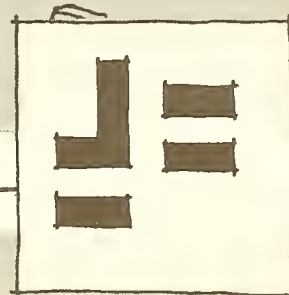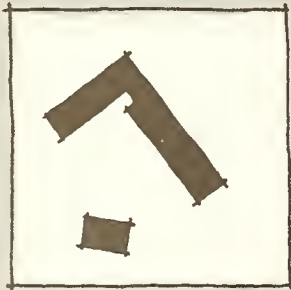- "Too many units on a small area." (abutter)
- "We hardly use our front door — everything happens out the rear."
- "You never see any one coming out of their front doors, except to put out the garbage —they use their backdoors." (abutter).
- "We wish they were single detached units."
- "I like all the buildings together around the courtyard — it's cozy and safer too."
- "Our inner circle makes it safer — for the kids, for the cars, and for our private property."

Andrew Square

I think the buildings all facing each other is great — we can really keep an eye on each other."
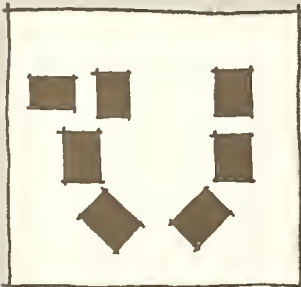
- "I don't mind the units attached — but more than three would be too much."
- "I feel like I'm in a fishbowl; I feel safer."
- "I feel safer with all the units together and facing each other in a circle."
- "I think that the buildings all in a circle help with security."
- "I wish the units were single unattached because there would be more privacy and it would be less noisy."

Champlain Circle

I wish the buildings faced each other — the front building turns its back on our building."

- "It would be nice if the buildings grouped around the open space in the rear — by the garden and puddingstone. There is no relationship between the buildings and the open space."
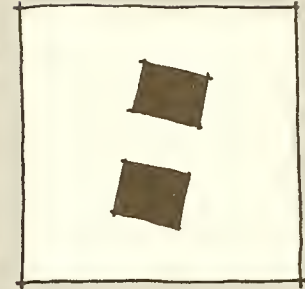
- "The buildings really aren't grouped."

- "There is a real problem with the front buildings using the rear buildings yard — the deed shows the property lines for each building but no one pays attention."

- "I planted a garden over by the puddingstone — it's too bad our building doesn't face that way or something, because no one hardly ever uses that space off to the side."

Forest Hills and Glen

I don't like all these seven houses attached — I have to walk down and around and across the front of all the units from my car at night because the parking is in the back and all the buildings are attached with no cut through."

- "I like the way the buildings with only two or three units are grouped — also there is a fair amount of space between them."

- "It would be nice if there were fewer units connected."

- "I think seven units attached is too much, but they look okay because of the porches and various overhangs." (abutter)

- "I like all the units facing out toward the street."
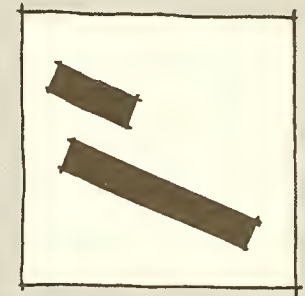
Lawn Street

All those units huddled together — it's like a fortress." (abutter)

- "I like the layout of the buildings — the grouped buildings around the courtyard makes the units safer."

- "The position of the units, facing each other, helps make the place safe."

- "There are just too many units on too small an area for this neighborhood. We are mostly a neighborhood of singles families — there are just too many people there for it to fit in well." (abutter)

- "I think the place is safer because the buildings are attached. Everyone watches out for everyone else."
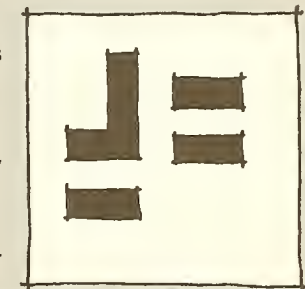
Wenlock and Stock

Organization of the Site

We put the fence up for looks, as well as privacy — who ever heard of leaving everything open?"

- "I like how the buildings are all in a circle and the open area in the middle for the kids to play, but sometimes I feel as if I'm in a fishbowl — there is no private yard to sunbathe."

- "We bought and put up the wrought iron fences in the front — all three units together. It gives our private front yards a finished look."

- "We are going to put up fences between our property — it will make cookouts more private."

- "We wouldn't sit out on our front stoop like in our old neighborhood because there is too much traffic from the T stop, and there is more of a community feeling in the rear."

- "We put up a fence all around our property for privacy, and so that the little one can play in our own yard."

- "I would like to plant a garden in my backyard — but I'm afraid of what the neighbors would say. Although it is our own, people make comments about what you can do with it because they can see it from their backyards."

Andrew Square

It would make sense to privatize all open space from the beginning — that way you would know who is responsible for what."
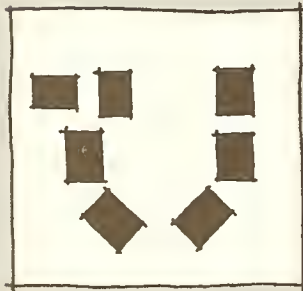
- "Make it clear to everyone who owns what."

- "I don't like people watering my lawn — don't they know that my backyard is my backyard to do whatever I want? If I want dead grass then it is none of their business."

- "We should all have our own yards in the rear with a defined area."

- "A planting area in the front is fine, but the real backyard should be in the backyard."

- "The kids do play in the backyard sometimes; but mostly in the front because people feel that the rear yards are private."

- "My kids play in the backyard — it's safer and there are less eyes on them."

- "The fence in the rear helps with the privacy — although kids found a way to cut holes into the fence and come through. The vice president of the Association finally put bars across the open fence and that seems to keep them out now."

- "I wish someone would keep those darn kids from racing around in our rear yards —they are private property and should have fences up to keep the kids from running around and riding their bikes on the grass."

Champlain Circle

People don't think this is private property — why even the police came in and parked in our yard staking out the apartments next door for drugs — they said they thought this was a common parking lot."

- "Our yard would be more private if there was an adequate fence to keep the kids and other people from cutting through."

- "It would be nice to have a small porch on my level (2nd and 3rd floor apartment). I don't walk down to the front porch to sit out — the people on the first floor think of that as theirs anyway. It could be just big enough for two chairs — just to have a place outside that was private."

- "I wish they had put up some fences — then we could be more private instead of right up on the corner of a busy intersection."
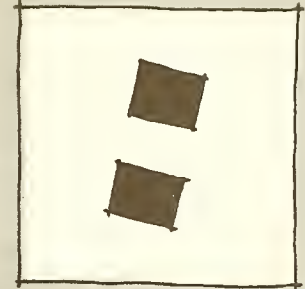
Forest Hills and Glen

I don't feel that I have much private space — there is no landscaping, fences, or anything which would make me feel that it is my own."

- "I wish there were fences letting us know who owns what."

- "I think the porches are terrific — they are just wide enough to sit out on and probably weren't too expensive."

- "I feel like my front porch is also part of my backyard — in the sense that it is an area I can use privately."

- "People think bushes are a good way to make back and front yards private — I think that's crazy when security is more of an issue. I cut down a tree in front of my house so that the kids wouldn't climb it and get in the front bedroom window."

Lawn Street

I like having the private yard in the rear, especially with the fence around it —it feels more secure."

- "I use my backyard all the time and it is very private, even if it is right on Gallivan Blvd. I would never use my front yard — I just would never do that."

- "We don't use our backyard because half of the space is taken up by the parking space. We have tried to barbeque in the front courtyard, but our neighbors have complained because they say it is common space. They see it as a 'show piece' rather than a place to use — that is reserved for the backyards."

- "I use my backyard quite a bit — it feels very safe and private."
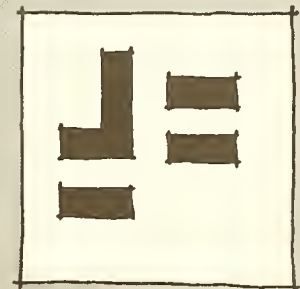
Wenlock and Stock

Private Space Outdoors

I *love the common space* — all the kids play together — we have had two barbeques it really helps us all get along and build a sense of community."

- "The play area for the children is created because of the way the buildings are grouped around a 'courtyard' — I think it's great, and really safe for the kids."
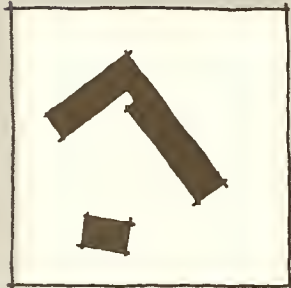
- "I don't think that the kids should be allowed to use the entire backyard as a playground."

- "Kids tend to congregate in one area — that's why it's important to provide one common area so that they don't run over everyone's private property."

- "The kids play in the open area together — it's great, because all the parents can watch each other's kids."

- "The parking lot in the middle helps us to get to know each other because we have to deal with each other."

- "Because there is so much common space and responsibilities, I made it my business to make sure I was one of the trustees."

Andrew Square

I *'d rather have* private yards instead of common space — privatize everything."
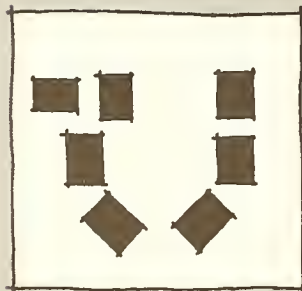
- "The kids all play in the front circle — they like the tar because they can ride their bikes around — it's better to have one place where they all can keep an eye on each other —the big ones watch out for the little ones."

- "The kids race around the rear of the houses over the private property — there should be one place where they can play together."

- "Kids tend to hang out in the same area — why not provide a place where they are out of our hair?"

- "Since I don't have any kids, I don't know whose kids belong to whom. I don't know if there are kids from outside the development hanging around in our circle either — this could be a problem if there was a common space because it would be open ground for anyone."

- "If you let the kids play together in the circle there is alot more noise, especially in the summer, than if they played in their own backyards."

Champlain Circle

I *wish we could* tell the difference between backs and fronts."

- "Everybody thinks of all the yard as common space — that's part of the problem."

- "So much of the common space is mixed up with the cars — this is not good."

- "It would be nice if the common driveway was asphalted — then maybe people would know the difference between common space and private."
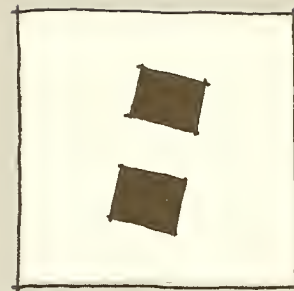
Forest Hills and Glen

Common space would be a bad thing as the kids from the projects would come up and take it over and no one could really know who is ours and who is not."

- "I put up this basketball hoop so the kids could play together in the street — it's good for them, and helps us as parents to get to know each other."

- "Kids use the street as a play area — it's fine now, but when the bricklayers put their housing in, the street will be too busy."
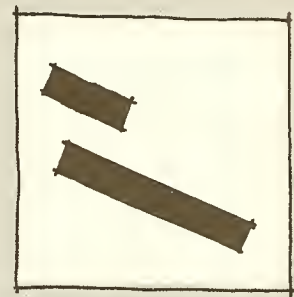
Lawn Street

I *wish there was* more common space for the kids to ride their bikes around — my daughter used to ride on the walkway out front, until the neighbors complained — now she uses the parking lot because our backyard is too small."

- "The kids who used to hang out here before the development came back in the beginning — if there was a common space they might feel like they could hang out in it."

- "We sometimes horse around with the kids in the front yard — the neighbors don't like that because they say they don't like a playground in their front yard."

- "I like the common courtyard area — everyone feels responsible for it so it feels much safer with all these eyes looking out for it."

- "Why do we need common space? There is a playground right next to the development if the kids want to run around together."
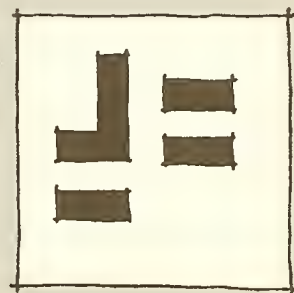
Wenlock and Stock

Common Space Outdoors

I *like the parking* by the back door — group parking would be perfect for kids to vandalize."

- "The cars are very safe as the parking is in the rear — we all watch out for each other's cars."
- "I don't like them parking on the street for two reasons — I've been living here for 32 years and they take my place; and I shouldn't have to smell the exhaust from this one guy's car — it stinks." (abutter)
- "I think the cars are much safer all parked in here on the inside — the more eyes on them the better."
- "I like the parking in the rear — it's safe — but what about mixing parking with kids?"
- "I don't think the kids should be forced to play together where the cars are."

Andrew Square

Kids and cars are like oil and water."
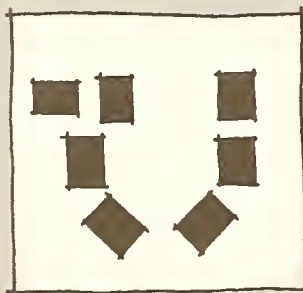
- "Everybody keeps their eyes out for everyone else — especially our cars because they are in the front."
- "Because all the buildings face out towards the cul-de-sac, and the cars are parked out in front, the kids tend to play in the circle in the middle — this is nice, because they can all play together, but it is a problem since cars pull in and out of their driveways."
- "I love the parking in the front of the house — it's safe, for both me and my car."
- "I don't like the way all the cars look in the front, but it is safer for them."
- "There is no place for visitors to park — a real problem."
- "It looks like a car dealership to me." (abutter)

Champlain Circle

The problem with the parking for our building is that it is over there away from the building — it's hard to get the groceries in and out."

- "There is a problem with the parking. We all have assigned spaces, but because there are no lines or pavement, people don't park where they should. For example, the people in the front building park in the fire lane — we are worried about that. They insist that this part of the driveway is part of their parking, but it is not. Next, people think this is a public parking area. People from the development next door have visitors who sometimes park here — even a few times the police parked here to stake out the development next door to check for drugs — they thought this was a public lot."

- "I wish the parking wasn't in front of the garden that our neighbor planted."

- "There is plenty of parking — it isn't assigned, but we all know each other's places."
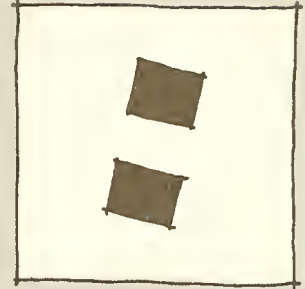
Forest Hills and Glen

I don't use my parking because I can't get to it from my back door — since it is on a platform, and there are no stairs coming off of it, I have to walk down and around to the front of my house."

- "There should be a defining line around the parking space."

- "It's easier to park in front of the house on the street than in my spot — it gives us more room around the house."

- "I park on the street because it's safer then parking in the back where it's dark."

- "Because all of these units are connected (7 units) I don't use the parking — I would have to walk down and all around the front before I got to the house."
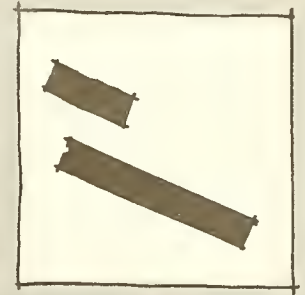
Lawn Street

I don't like the parking — it's not close to my front or back door."

- "I don't think the group parking is as safe for the cars as if we each had our own spaces by our houses."

- "I don't like the group parking — even though the places are assigned, people park in my place — probably visitors."

- "Most of us are two car families — one parking place isn't enough."

- "You know, they sold this place as a family unit, and a place which is convenient to the thruway — well why aren't there more parking spaces?"

- "I like the parking — it's right out my backdoor."

- "I don't park in my place because it is on the other side of the building — I park on Stock Street."
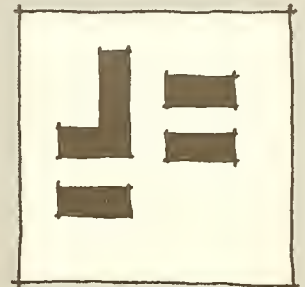
Wenlock and Stock

People and Cars

Come on how can I complain — I never dreamed of owning myself!!"

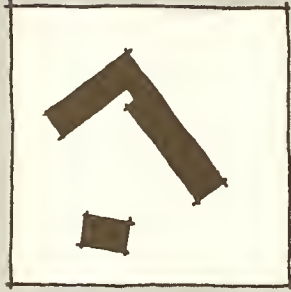- "It's a good thing there is a formalized condo association or else we could have never gotten people to agree to put up the fence. In order to get people to work together, you have to have some formalized structure in place from the beginning, with clear by-laws. Not to say these things can't be changed or shaped by the development, but everyone has to know what they are buying into from the beginning."

- "I re-seeded my backyard, putting down the brick walkway myself; people here just don't realize that things just don't fix themselves."

- "The association works well, we get along. I guess you could say I'm lucky because I'm on the side with only three units and we tend to agree pretty much because we're all young and have kids. Sometimes with the whole group it's hard, though — getting people to agree can be a tough business. I only hope it keeps working as well as it has in a few years or so. Everyone is still excited about just owning — who knows how people will feel in a few years when they can sell and move on."

- "I wish it wasn't a condo association arrangement — everyone on their own would be better. However, I know it is cheaper because of the group water meter, insurance and so on."

Andrew Square

I think the homeowners association works fine, but there should be some real power of the association — now we just deal with 'paint color' kinds of issues."
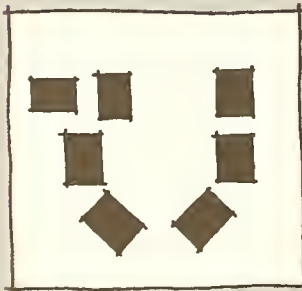
- "Champlain Circle is a sturdy rung on the ladder of getting up and out."

- "I love it here — I am lucky I am able to own."

- "Champlain Circle has a homeowner association agreement. Each buyer had to sign that they would join in order to receive financing. However, there is no real economic incentive for people to pay their dues or come to meetings. Each unit pays its own water bill and insurance — it is different at other developments, I know. There is a lack of power to make people pay their dues, or incentives to get them involved. If the association was a condo association, it would be different. In the by-laws it would be written that people have to participate; and there would be the economic incentive for them to do so."

- "I don't go to the homeowner association meetings because I am my own person and I keep to myself."

- "The association has worked on a number of issues including getting a street sign, and getting the street sweepers to come down into the circle. We called and wrote for months, and now they come into the neighborhood and go down School Street, but have not once come into the cul-de-sac. Because the city has not been very responsive, people have gotten frustrated and have dropped out."

- "People must check with the homeowners association before they do anything to their unit on the outside — owners that are side by side must use the same color on their porches, similiar screen doors, and so forth."

- "The circle belonging to everyone makes it safer — all the people here feel as if they have to watch out for the circle — if it was just 'your yard, my yard' there wouldn't be as many people watching out."

Champlain Circle

I *feel lucky* that I can own."

- "The association works okay, but there are problems between the front building and the rear (my) building. Since we are two different associations, we have no reason to cooperate or communicate in any organized fashion. This can be a real problem since we have common issues and areas to deal with. Something should have been done by the developer to keep this problem from arising — maybe one association for all eight units, or some way of binding the development."

- "With a condo association, everything should be spelled out in advance — where everyone's parking is, who gets what space in the cellar, etc. — we have had bad problems with these things. If the developer had simply assigned these things it wouldn't be so bad; or the association could have been given the power through by-laws to really set policy for the development."

- "There is a huge puddingstone in the basement — I know it would have been costly to get rid of it, but they should have divided the space in the basement for us in a different way."
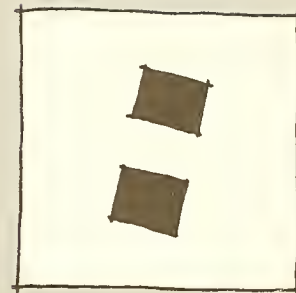
Forest Hills and Glen

I *was happy until* I heard they are selling the units to the BHA (for rental units) — they say they need the money to finish the landscaping and so on, but isn't ownership what this place is supposed to be all about?!"

- "Our condo association hasn't met yet — that is why there are so many unresolved problems. The management company told us that they couldn't have a meeting of homeowners until all the units were sold — I think that was a big mistake. We had to get something going — now we are starting from scratch and we have been here for a long time already."

- "It's hard to tell what's ours and what's everyones. We have to water the shrubbery together through the association, but I know we can build a deck or something if we want."

- "I helped start the Crime Watch because of all the crime problems. I think if we had a condo association in place with regular meetings, it would have helped."

- "They finally put in some landscaping and then want us to water it. That's fine, and two people volunteered to coordinate this effort. They brought us hoses too. But is this any way to maintain a development?"
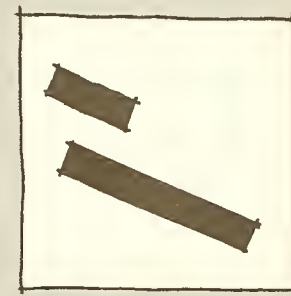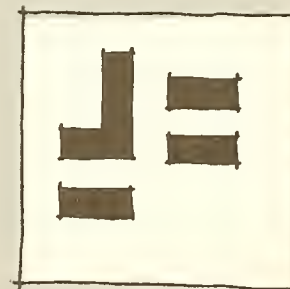
Lawn Street

I *wish we* had our own water meter — sometimes with these kinds of things which require group decisions, it's like having your own home but not really."

- "I think that the condo association works just fine."

Wenlock and Stock

Ownership and Organization

I don't like the shape of the buildings — too thick, fat, pregnant looking for this area where the houses are taller." (abutter)

- "I think the buildings all lined up are okay — I wish they didn't look all alike."

- "They should have covered the cement foundation in the front — it looks cheap and unfinished."

- "They don't try to fit in, do they? They are all enclosed, they stay on the inside of the courtyard." (abutter)

- "The buildings look just fine — they fit in — the people in them are no bother to anyone." (abutter)

- "I like how the buildings look — a far cry from my public housing days."

- "I like the way the rowhouses look up front on the property."

- "They fit in just fine, but if they were detached they would fit in better."
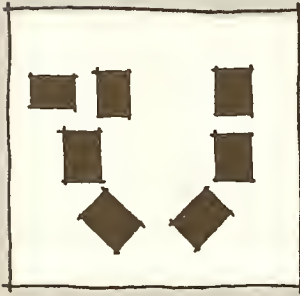
Champlain Circle

We are isolated — an island in the middle of a lot of water. The buildings look different, suburban-like. I can understand why kids come to rip us off."

- "I wish they painted the buildings — do you know Warren Gardens? I like the way those look."

- "The buildings look fine — I like the way they look with the overhangs over the doors."

- "They should have painted the buildings different colors — instead of staining all the same color."

- "The houses should be painted, not stained. They look cheap this way."

- "You come down into our little circle and it's like you're entering another world — we don't fit in at all, we set an example of how things can be if you just give decent people housing."

- "They don't look like they fit in, but they are really good for the neighborhood."

- "They should have painted the porches" (interviewed as painting his porch.)
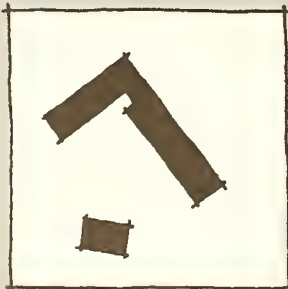
Andrew Square

I wish they had stained the buildings by hand painting instead of by spray gun — we will have to do it over ourselves in a few years."

- "The buildings look cheap — they didn't use quality materials or put any details into the houses." (abutter)

- "The housing type doesn't really fit into the neighborhood, but there really is no one type anymore anyway. There used to be many more single family large houses like mine, now there are few. Even the triple deckers are being turned into three separate units. Therefore, I don't really care anymore about how they look, as long as they are kept up." (abutter)

- "I like the way the buildings look, but we are having a problem with warping tiles and water staining. They should have put gutters on the side of the house so that the water off the roof would not run down the side and stain the building."

- "This is a really nice neighborhood and I think we fit right in."
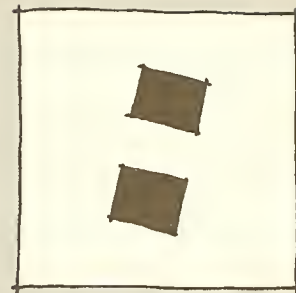
Forest Hills and Glen

The overhangs and little awnings over the porches really make an effort to model after the existing housing stock — pretty good attempt at making them fit in."

- "I like the way the overhangs over the sides look." (abutter)

- "The siting is more interesting than other developments — I like the staggered buildings, and the shifted building at this end of the street."

- "The buildings look okay — it sort of feels like the suburbs here."

- "I think they look great — they are reminiscent of the triple deckers, not in height but in style." (abutter)

- "I think they fit in just fine — if they finished the landscaping they would fit in better."

- "This housing is much better for the neighborhood than if it were not here — I don't really care how it looks, I'm just glad it's not vacant land anymore." (abutter)
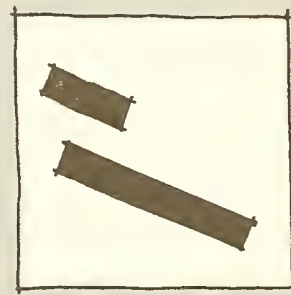
Lawn Street

Too many units on too small an area — looks crowded."

- "Those garages under the Stock Street units — they look ridiculous. They really close the place off from the neighborhood, putting the rest of the building up so high looking down on us."

- "They look just fine. They are better than the Dairy Queen that was here."

- "The newest townhouses on Stock Street are just too high. They look like fortresses. They don't do anything for the neighborhood." (abutter)

- "I don't really think the buildings try to fit in — after all, the rear of my unit faces the neighborhood."

- "They put this fence up, higher than mine, here let me show you. I made them cut it down to the height of my fence. They are trying to close themselves out from the community."

- "The parking garages under the Stock Street condos make the front look like rears — they turn their back on the street."
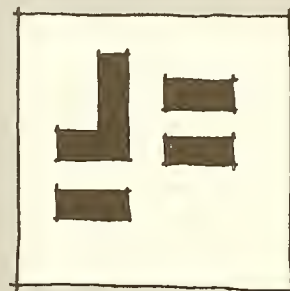
Wenlock and Stock

dings Look and Fit in the Neighborhood

I *heard* I can't build up

build up — which will be a problem for me with two kids as I'll need another bedroom. Wouldn't put a bedroom in the basement because of the water problem — it's too damp and cold."

- "I think the space under the bay windows is a waste — too small to do anything with, too large to not deal with at all. I put gravel in my area and planted a few bushes because the grass did not grow."

- "Can't use my parking space because of ice in the Winter and water in the Fall."

- "I think it is a problem that people can't build up — an entire row would have to agree to do it, and even so, the structure of the building may not support it. This is why I wish the units were detached."

- "I wish there were full basements, not just half basements with crawl space."

- "The windows are too low in front — I had to put in shutters for privacy."

- "No carpet under the dining area in the family room — too hard to keep it clean."
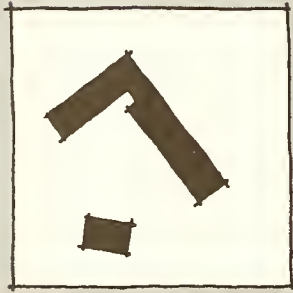
Andrew Square

I *wish the* basements

basements were finished, even if it cost us $5,000 more. I would rather things be finished right and pay a little more."

- "Latex paint instead of flat paint — easier to keep clean if you have small children. A number of owners have already repainted their units."

- "The shingles on the side of the house are warping — this could be a real problem in the future."

- "Drainage problems. In the winter the circle fills in with water and ices over — it's like a skating rink. Part of the problem is that the street isn't plowed by the city; but the lack of appropriate drainage is the biggest problem. Because of this, I have water in my basement right now."

- "We put a (metal) awning over our doorway — since we are the unit in the middle, we didn't get one. The people on either side think it looks okay."

- "The door frames are not sturdy, and that's why most of us have put in gates over our doors."
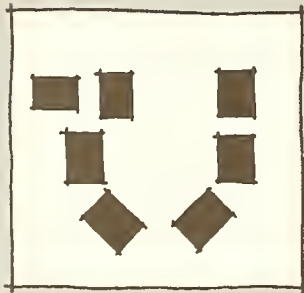
Champlain Circle

Maintenance works okay. We have two condo associations here
and we have handled things pretty well."

- "I wish the larger, family units were on the bottom instead of on the top — I won't let my kids out alone because I'm too high up to watch them from the bedroom window."

- "I like the way the buildings look, but we are having a problem with warping tiles and water staining. They should have put gutters on the side of the house so that the water off the roof would not run down the side and stain the building."

- "Fire escapes are no good. If there was a fire, we wouldn't make it from the bedrooms to the kitchen. I have put together a rope and sheet contraption out of the kid's rooms."

- "Fire escapes are a big problem. If there were a fire, I would have to get my kids down from the bedrooms on the third floor to the kitchen on the second floor. Then, we have to share the one escape with the unit on the other side. Why couldn't they put fire escapes from the third floor?"
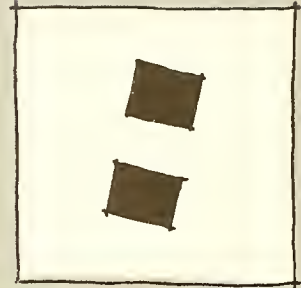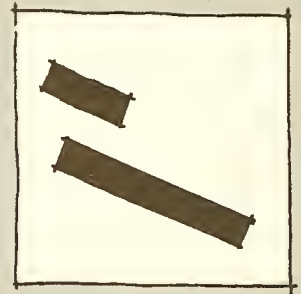
Forest Hills and Glen

I'm going to put a window in my kitchen to look out the back — there are
pheasants in our backyard."

- "There are wet basements — this is a real problem."

- "I'm glad we can build up or out back."

- "We're going to put a deck out back."

- "We ripped up the carpeting in the living room and put in hardwood floors."

Lawn Street

They look good but they don't act good — I've had lots of problems with
water in my basement, cracks in walls, etc."

- "They did a good job with how the units look, but there were some simple issues that they could have remedied without much expense if they had only listened, for example the space for the washer/dryer is too small."

- "After I bought the unit, I raised the issue of the space reserved for our stack washer and dryer because it was too small. After all, they marketed these units as family units, but an eight pound washer isn't big enough. I even sent drawings to the architects showing him the simple changes he could make taking some space out of the second bathroom. He didn't listen. We finally had to do the work ourselves, opening up the wall to the kitchen in front of the machines and putting the washer/dryer stack in sideways."

- "We wanted a basement but the attic is okay."
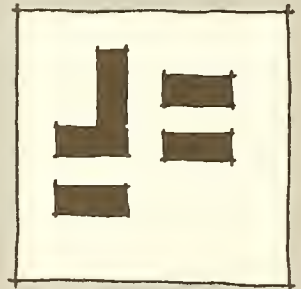
Wenlock and Stock

How Buildings Work

This project utilized an obvious but rarely used method of learning about housing developments: Asking the residents who live in them what they think. Too often those most affected by housing policies and design decisions—the residents themselves—are not provided a voice.

I wanted residents to talk freely and with ease, so I chose not to set up formal appointments. Instead, I simply visited a development and knocked on doors. I tried to talk with neighbors as well. I visited each development at least a half-dozen times, both during daytime and evening hours. I tried to talk with as many of the residents and neighbors as possible. At times I did set up appointments, but only to accommodate people's scheduling needs. In total I was able to talk with more than 75 residents and abutters during a time span of about four weeks.

It was not rare that I would sit and talk with people in their kitchens as they prepared dinner; on their front stoops as they watched their kids; or followed them around as they tended to their garden or washed their cars. I spent from 20 minutes to over an hour with each person. At times during repeat visits I would talk with the same person a second or third time.

I opened conversations with a brief explanation of why I was conducting the interviews, trying to get people talking as soon as possible. I listened hard and carefully, spoke as little as possible, and took as much or as little time as they indicated they had to offer.

People soon realized that I really wanted to hear what they thought, and that I respected their opinions. Because of this approach, I was relatively successful at building a sense of trust and open dialogue. I took extensive notes during each conversation and "debriefed" at the end of each session, writing down all of my general impressions.

In arranging the information, I first culled through all the individual interview notes and identified the eight to ten broad issues that people had most commonly raised. Next, I compiled the quotes by these issues for each development. Finally, I cut and pasted together the quotes as they best seemed to relate to each other. General headings such as "How do kids use outdoor spaces?" emerged after the quotes had been pieced together.

As I began this research I did not look for reactions to predetermined issues of design. Rather, I wanted to explore freely the issues that the residents themselves raised, taking full advantage of what could be learned. Accordingly, the points raised by those interviewed and included in this report should not be viewed as an all-inclusive list of design guidelines, but rather as an informal arrangement of ideas and issues which the residents raised through a series of conversations.

One final note: I usually found that once people overcame the initial shock of someone from the City at their door asking them for their opinion, people were responsive, warm, open, and had much to say. All I really had to do was to ask and listen.

RH — Summer 1987

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD